

Measuring a Nation's Wellbeing: A Psycho-cultural Investigation

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Abstract

This paper investigates the cultural, social and political contexts of the Prime Minister, David Cameron's proposal to measure the wellbeing of the UK population. I adopt a psycho-cultural approach whereby theories and methods from the disciplines of psychoanalytic and psychosocial studies are combined with those from the fields of media and cultural studies. The paper includes relevant case study material taken from the UK press, television, documents and artefacts within popular culture. From this investigation, I provide a critical cultural analysis and contextualisation of the proposal to measure wellbeing. This comprises an examination of recurring themes and discourses in those texts, linking them with cultural movements and histories. I explore the position of wellbeing measurement in terms of the contemporary psychosocial debates about the nature of 'therapy culture'. The paper draws on Cooper's (2009) psychodynamic approach to the interrogation of policy processes, which explores that which is absent, suppressed or denied. I suggest that the current exposition of wellbeing measurement, as deployed by David Cameron, is underpinned by a culturally powerful therapeutic discourse, comprised of a version of self-help therapy culture that has an undercurrent of neoliberal pro-market values. This discourse has been strategically applied by the current government as a means of situating the locus of responsibility for personal wellbeing firmly on the individual. This investigation forms a new intervention in contemporary psychosocial debates about the nature and value of 'therapy culture' and is a contribution to the development of a psycho-cultural studies approach.

Keywords: Psycho-Cultural. Wellbeing. Happiness. Neoliberal. Therapy Culture.

Introduction

In this paper, I examine a particular aspect of my ongoing PhD research in which I undertake a textual and contextual analysis of the turn that positive psychology has taken in the UK.²⁴ My intention is to consider the notion of wellbeing measurement in its wider cultural context, taking as a methodological example the work of Nunn (2002) in her book on politics and fantasy, in which she argues for the importance of thinking about politics beyond the official regulations, policies and debates. Like Nunn, I will draw on a wide range of sources, such as speeches, newspaper articles from both broadsheets and tabloid press, political biographies and popular television, in order to explore how media representations can shape a particular discourse and how meanings associated with political and national life can be constructed. As my methodological approach is psycho-cultural, I will then try to understand it in the light of psychoanalysis. I am informed by the clinical application of psychoanalysis as a theoretical procedure as defined by Highmore (2007, 2008) whereby methodology takes the form of attention or processual awareness. Highmore has suggested that applying this form of attention to the study of an aspect of culture allows the potential for the researcher as listener to pick up on a voice in the narrative that may otherwise go unheard. This does not mean that the listener must be a passive recipient of the narrative, but they employ a form of “distracted attention attuned and attuning itself to the speech of another” (Highmore, 2007, p.96) This is the use of psychoanalysis as an interpretive strategy in order to explore, in Cooper’s words, what is ‘absent’, ‘suppressed’ or ‘denied’ (Cooper, 2009 p.170).

The psychologist Martin Seligman and his colleagues claim that the discipline of psychology has become too focused on the negative aspects of human experience. They suggest there is a need for a branch of psychology that should dedicate itself to the scientific study of positive emotions, wellbeing and human potential. The relatively new discipline of positive psychology has sought to re-direct psychology’s emphasis from the pathological to optimal human functioning and wellbeing. In doing so, it has initially distanced itself from existing psychological theories, such as psychoanalytic or humanistic traditions, in order to maintain, what it sees as its status as a separate discipline grounded in the scientific (Seligman 2000, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 2006; Wallis 2005). According to Peterson ‘Positive psychology is the scientific study of what goes right in life, from birth to death and all the stops in between.’ He concluded that it was right for psychology to have its own field of inquiry dedicated to the study of what makes life worth living (2006. pp.4-6). Positive psychology’s proposal that positive emotional states can be scientifically studied has impressed the UK’s Coalition government. In November 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron initiated a £2 million plan to measure happiness in the UK (Cameron, 2010b). This is being implemented by the Office for National Statistics asking people to rate their own wellbeing, their intention is to publish the first official wellbeing index in 2012 (ONS, 2011). A movement that can influence government policy is clearly one that needs to be engaged with and evaluated. This paper looks in more detail at how the term ‘wellbeing’ has been interpreted by the mainstream media to be firmly equated with the notion of happiness. It will also discuss how the narrative of wellbeing has been played out in the political arena and in the results of the public consultation on measuring the nation’s wellbeing. I contend that the narrative used by David Cameron is emblematic of a version of self-help therapy culture that has an underlying discourse, which articulates neoliberal pro-market values. The measurement of wellbeing, as discussed here, is a version of governance as outlined by Brown (2005) in which human life is reduced to rational transactions with an invasion of the

market into all institutions and social actions. What results is an unlinking of the individual from their social contexts (Layton, 2006) and a society in a state of manic defense (Peltz, 2006). I argue for the intervention of a psychoanalytically inflected, psychosocial 'voice' into the debate that may invite us to consider a more nuanced way of thinking about what wellbeing means. As Bainbridge and Yates (2011) have noted, a psycho-cultural approach can allow for an understanding of the experience of living which takes into account feelings of loss and anxiety alongside our encounters with pleasures and delights.

The discourse of the therapeutic has permeated our family, social, business and political lives to the extent that it is difficult to isolate it from other dominant cultural codes, such as economic liberalism, which organize selfhood (Illouz, 2008). 'Wellbeing', arising from that therapeutic language is complex and contested concept which Carlisle and Hanlon (2007) suggest falls into four main discourses: scientific, popular, critical and environmental. Multiple terms are mobilized to define wellbeing, ranging from positive emotions, positive feelings, positive affects, life satisfaction and happiness but it is the equation of 'wellbeing' with 'happiness' that has particularly influenced current political debate and policy making (Carlisle and Hanlon 2007). I want to look at the ways in which the political concept of wellbeing has been encoded through communications of various kinds to explore how use has been made of a therapeutic discourse that has been assimilated into a neoliberal world-view.

To begin, it is necessary to unpick how the term 'wellbeing' has been defined and mobilized for the purpose of measuring a nation's wellbeing. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been tasked with developing measures of national wellbeing and progress. Jil Matheson, National Statistician, emphasized that the term 'wellbeing' is often taken to mean 'happiness', however she goes on to say that:

Happiness is one aspect of the wellbeing of individuals and can be measured by asking them about their feelings – subjective wellbeing. As we define it, wellbeing includes both subjective and objective measures. It includes feelings of happiness and other aspects of subjective wellbeing, such as feeling that one's activities are worthwhile, or being satisfied with family relationships. (Matheson 2011, p.2)

In my examination of the media reporting around David Cameron's announcement of his plans to have the wellbeing of the nation measured I found that in the UK popular media, the notion wellbeing was largely equated with happiness. I examined reports and articles following Cameron's announcement as they emerged in both broadsheet and tabloid media as well as on reports and discussions on UK television programmes. The overall sentiment that arose from the reporting was one of scepticism around the potential benefits that the measurement of wellbeing could have. A report in *The Times* (Woolf 2011) informs us that the Prime Minister David Cameron had 'ordered ministers to ensure that what they do puts a bigger smile on people's faces.' The article noted that ministers are required to test policies for economic, social and environmental impacts and this is to be joined by a test for whether a policy will, 'increase the sum total of human happiness—a test that will be incorporated into the Treasury's Green Book, the guide on how government should appraise what it does.

Scepticism was widely expressed in the popular media through daytime television programmes such as the ITV 1 morning chat show hosted by Lorraine Kelly, (*Lorraine ITV 1* 2011), in which the topic of happiness measurement was raised during the newspaper review. Lorraine Kelly said that she was shocked by the cost, which the papers reported as being £2 million; her guests agreed and the general consensus was that in a time of austerity 'there are better things to spend money on'. In the speech delivered by David Cameron (2010b) to launch the project to measure wellbeing, he sought to assure listeners that the concept of wellbeing

measurement was not 'woolly,' yet, this was the term used by one of Lorraine's guests. The idea that happiness is a very personal experience that is hard to define, let alone measure, is returned to by Lorraine later in the programme: 'I mean happiness for me, for example, is, you know, when it's pouring down with rain outside, but you are at home, indoors, in your pajamas, with a nice hot cup of tea' (Lorraine 2011).

The print media also seemed unconvinced by the proposals. Whilst *The Daily Mail* was pleased to note that happy people live longer, they invited 'family expert' and author Jill Kirby to comment: 'The whole idea that individual contentment can be measured is at best foolish and at worst intrusive. The government should be concentrating on practical things affecting our lives rather than what they think we feel' (Doughty, 2011).

The Daily Star called the government's plans to survey happiness a 'fiasco' and drew comment from the Taxpayers Alliance, who oppose what they call 'big government' and task themselves with criticizing 'all examples of wasteful and unnecessary spending'; their research director, John O'Connell described the survey as 'a complete waste of time and money' (Wall, 2011). There is further outrage in their editorial section where readers are reminded of the economic constraints the country is under, the editorial asserts 'you do not need an expensive survey to tell you how you are feeling do you? ... Especially when idiot ministers waste scarce public funds on stupid studies like this' (*The Daily Star*, 2011)

In the year that followed David Cameron's announcement regarding the measurement of the nation's wellbeing, the UK coalition government had begun to implement a programme of cuts in public spending. The journalist, Moore (2012) writing in *The Guardian*, noted that David Cameron had gone rather quiet on the subject of happiness. She argued that because the government's focus was now on austerity, happiness had been subject to the cuts, and concluded that a government concentrating on austerity would be unable to create conditions to improve the nation's wellbeing.

In addition to the more sceptical opinions expressed in popular media, there were also articles that sought to promote happiness as a lifestyle choice. *The Independent* (14/01/12) offered a special edition on happiness in their supplement magazine; and *The Observer* (29/01/12) gave readers a free copy of Tal Ben-Shahar's *Happier*, a book offering a 'crash course on happiness'. It is possible to sense a certain ambivalence then, as the same newspapers with reports that problematised the measurement of wellbeing, still wanted to offer their readers a guide on how to be happy.

The days preceding the first release of data from the ONS on the well being index were preceded by two significant events. On 29th November 2011 the Chancellor George Osborne presented his autumn statement to the house, where he had to admit that the period of austerity would be longer than first predicted, perhaps even as long as seven years as the figures for growth had been lower than expected. The following day saw what has been described as the biggest public sector strike in a generation. The ONS data revealed that the average happiness rating in their survey was 7.4. Mark Easton on *BBC News 24* suggested that this figure indicated a reasonably high level of overall wellbeing and he wondered if this figure signified a 'keep calm and carry on' attitude of the British public, he speculated that the data about the nation's happiness would now be applied to find what 'buttons to press for the feel good factor' (Easton, 2011). The rating of 7.4 for the measurement of wellbeing of a nation at a time of severe economic constraint may at first seem encouraging, however, we may do well to be sceptical, as Eagleton has noted; 'when the colonialists assure us that the natives are thriving, we would do well to be cautious' (Eagleton, 2004 p.129). I will now examine in more detail David Cameron's proposals to measure wellbeing.

Prior to the general election in 2010, when David Cameron became prime minister in a coalition government, he demonstrated his advocacy of wellbeing measurement. He made his reasons clear in a TED talk²⁵ in February 2010 where he declares; 'we have run out of money' and he wanted to know how it would be possible to make things better but without spending any more. He argues that we are now living in a 'post bureaucratic' age where we have seen a shift in power from the local, to the central and finally to the people and what the people want is 'transparency, choice and accountability', with choice being the underpinning conservative philosophy because it 'puts people in the driving seat'. In his view the only way to succeed is to 'go with the grain of human nature' and that is where he sees the new developments in 'positive psychology' and 'behavioural economics' as having a part to play, as they will enable governments to 'treat people as they are rather than as you would like them to be.' Cameron suggests that the developments in these two sciences will enable new modes of measuring a nation's progress in terms other than those of GDP, he states that; 'If you think everything is valued in money you are going to have a very miserable time' (Cameron, 2010a).

Once in government, Cameron was able to implement his ideas and, in his speech announcing the proposals to measure the nation's wellbeing, he recounts his excitement at being able to apply something that he had talked about in opposition and that people had speculated he might never achieve once in office. Measuring wellbeing, he suggests; 'is important to our goal of trying to create a family friendly country.' He is explicit about what he sees as the basic tenet of his proposals, that the conservatives have an 'instinct that people who feel in control of their own destiny feel more fulfilled'. He thinks that central to the debate will be social mobility and the extent to which people consider 'they are authors of their own destiny' (Cameron 2010b). Cameron highlights in this speech the key areas where he sees the coalition government as having a positive impact on the nation's well-being; 'real choice' for parents over schools and patients over treatment, the understanding that having the 'purpose of a job is as important to the soul as it is to the bank balance' and their concept of the Big Society, because 'people have a yearning to belong to something bigger than themselves (Cameron 2010b). Jonty Olliff-Cooper (2011), a former adviser to the Conservative Party and now head of the progressive conservatism project at the think tank Demos, says he accepts that the idea of Conservatives backing a wellbeing agenda may seem strange at first but he claims that they are interested in how the individual's wellbeing can be maximized and that increased knowledge about wellbeing can form what he describes as a practical action guide for conservative thinking.

Prior to his election as Conservative Party leader, David Cameron presented his case for 'modern compassionate conservatism' which he defined as sharing the benefits of growth between tax cuts and public services, so that tax cuts aren't seen as 'tax breaks for the rich'; giving power back to local organisations; and of a 'small state' which must be the servant, not the master, of the people;

But when we roll back the state, we don't leave the poor, weak and vulnerable behind, we help them by unleashing the voluntary sector ... That's what I mean by modern compassionate conservatism. Modern, because we think our best days lie ahead. Compassionate, because we care about those who can get left behind. But Conservative, because it's those insights, principles and values that we share that will make this country even stronger (Cameron 2005).

²⁵ www.ted.com

In his book *The Meaning of David Cameron* (2010), Richard Seymour suggests that ‘Cameron is of little interest, except as a cipher, a sort of non-entity who channels the prevailing Geist’ (p.1). Seymour argues that in order to present themselves for re-election, the Tories felt the need to soften their image and to distance the Party from Thatcher, giving the impression that they were now positioned in the centre ground of politics. ‘Cameronism’ if there is such a thing, is merely an electoral formula:

that speaks to the need for Tories to reach out well beyond their own class base – that being capital and a section of the middle class. They have donned a ‘progressive’ and ‘centrist’ outfit, borrowing extensively from the New Labour wardrobe, out of electoral necessity (Seymour 2010, p.83).

Seymour concludes; ‘Cameronism is a pragmatic adaption to the needs of neoliberal statecraft’ (2010, p.83). Former UK prime minister, Tony Blair described the political right’s appropriation of the left’s language as ‘political cross-dressing’ but as Elliott and Hanning (2009) point out Cameron was ‘careful to include tweed, twinset and pearls in the wardrobe’ (p.315).

The proposition that wellbeing could be measured is an example of this ‘cross- dressing’ of political thought. The Labour government under Blair was instrumental in incorporating the notion of wellbeing into policy initiatives (Michaelson 2009). In 2008 the government published the *Foresight Review on Mental Capital and Wellbeing*, which called for the development of a wellbeing index. These proposals were never to make it to fruition during Labour’s time in office. However, wellbeing remained firmly embedded in the rhetoric of New Labour. It was there in their promotion of psychological therapies, through the implementation of the economist and government advisor, Lord Layard’s *Improving Access to Psychological Therapies* report (Department of Health, 2008). This report initiated the recruitment of 3,500 cognitive behavioural therapists with the specific remit to suggest ways in which the people they saw could become more upbeat and optimistic (Dorling 2010). A key proponent of wellbeing measurement, Layard went on to become one of the founding members of *Action for Happiness*, which describes itself as a movement for social change, ‘bringing people together to play a part in creating a happy society for everyone’.²⁶

Writing in 2007, Rustin provided a critique of the proposition under New Labour that wellbeing should be measured, suggesting that it was merely a ruse to divert the public’s attention away from pro-market policies. Cameron, it seems, is willing to persevere with this project, so Rustin’s concerns still stand. Rustin argues that there would be considerable difficulties in replacing the one-dimensional goal of measuring economic growth with a multi-dimensional concept of wellbeing because it fails to acknowledge the system in which we find ourselves. Our current economic system, he notes, means that there is a tendency to equate greater purchasing power with more choice and opportunity for individuals. He concludes that the proposals by New Labour in 2007 may have had a kernel of good intention, but ultimately served to ‘distract our attention from the ‘main line’ of pro market policies that are exacerbating the deep problems which such ‘micro solutions’ attempt to cure’ (Rustin 2007, p.11). With the current government’s willingness to implement the measurement of wellbeing at a time of acute economical and societal distress, perhaps the government has found another way to provide a calculus to declare success.

The first project for the Office for National Statistics in their task to measure the nation’s wellbeing was to call for a formal national consultation entitled ‘What Matters To You?’ July 2011

²⁶ www.actionforhappiness.org

saw the publication of their early findings. These indicated that what mattered most to people was health; good connections with friends and family; good connections with a spouse or partner; job satisfaction and economic security; present and future conditions of the environment. The ONS also found that a consistent theme running through many of the responses was that wellbeing would be significantly improved if there were a greater sense of fairness and equality. What seemed to be missing from the findings are the notions of 'choice' and 'destiny' favoured by Cameron, just as 'equality' was conspicuous by its absence in his political rhetoric. Another theme running through the ONS findings was the need to have politicians who they felt could be trusted. I would suggest that, there is a discord between the understanding of wellbeing according to the people and the one that is advocated by the current government.

The proposal to measure the nation's wellbeing, it would seem has been met with scepticism in the popular media. In addition, public responses so far seem to indicate that there may be a discrepancy between the government's definitions of wellbeing and those of the governed. One could argue that the notion that the nation's wellbeing can be measured is merely a deflection away from more negative news, particularly as the country finds itself under increasing economic pressure. With a lack of economic growth it is perhaps unsurprising that a government would seek, in desperation, a measure to indicate that they must be doing something right, a degree of cynicism may be appropriate. However, Cameron's proposals set out in his speeches on wellbeing, will have real policy implications. A system for measuring social cost benefit analysis has been developed by the Treasury department. First published in 2003 and updated in 2011, *The Green Book* sets out HM Treasury's guidance for central government for the appraisal of policies, programmes and projects, with the statement that; 'The government is committed to improving the way that wellbeing and social impacts are incorporated into policy decisions' (p.5). From 2011 this guidance was updated to include two techniques for the valuation of non-market impacts; the stated preference method which makes use of questionnaires to estimate 'people's willingness to pay for, or willingness to accept', the other is the revealed preference approach which 'observes people's behavior in related markets'. The idea behind this is that economic methods can be used to estimate the life satisfaction provided by non-market goods (a good or service not traded on the market including public goods, health, employment and marriage). The estimation of life satisfaction is then converted into a monetary figure, that is, economists seek to monetise the impact of a policy by looking at the impact it has on 'utility' (HM Treasury 2011). It would seem that under the guise of compassionate conservatism we find evidence of the pervasiveness of the market. As Cooper (2008) has noted, the public sector is just one component of the national 'business plan' where health and welfare 'commodities' are valued as much for their export and earning potentials as they are for their potential to benefit the population.

Placing a market value on public goods is an indication of the extent that the marketisation of social life has achieved the status of common sense. Pre-dating the 2008 banking crash and subsequent economic impacts and also the UK government's policy on wellbeing, the political scientist Wendy Brown (2005) had argued that in the economic thinking of neoliberalism, we see the reduction of all human life to rational transactions; neoliberal political rationality emerges as a mode of governance which encompasses, though is not limited to the state. This form of governance, when deployed; 'reaches from the soul of the citizen subject to education practice to practice of empire' and involves the extension and dissemination of market values to all institutions and social actions (Brown, 2005, p.39). In these terms, Brown asserts, the human being is configured as *homo economicus* and all dimensions of human life are viewed in terms of market rationality.

According to Brown, not only does neoliberalism assume that all aspects of social,

cultural and political life can be reduced to a calculus, but it actively develops institutional practices for its implementation. Despite the state providing the apparatus for this calculus it remains the market that is the organizing and regulative principle of both state and society and the individual is seen as an entrepreneurial actor in every sphere of life. Just as with Cameron's vision for individuals in the UK becoming 'authors of their own destiny', citizens under the neoliberal construct are morally obligated to manage their own lives with a rational deliberation of costs, benefits and consequences. A 'mismanaged life' for the neoliberal, Brown argued, is one in which the individual has failed to navigate the impediments to prosperity (Brown 2005). There is a deeply held notion of the self as a project that is viewed both as social norm and cultural obligation (Elliott and Lemert, 2006).

The Historian, Luttwak (1995) has suggested that we live in an age of 'turbo charged capitalism' in which we see contradictions at play, on the one hand the drive to perpetuate free market dynamic capitalism, and on the other a call for a return to family and community values. This double discourse is made explicit in the figure of David Cameron and his policies, he seems able to simultaneously describe Britain as being 'broken', because in his view, government got too big and has undermined responsibility (Jones 2011); yet he is also able to see a place for the state to measure the wellbeing of the people. On the one hand he wants to roll back the state, yet he also wants the state to understand, even infiltrate, our very interiors and explore our feelings. The wellbeing of the nation, in the view of David Cameron, will be increased with the application of conservative values of choice, family values and being in control of one's own destiny. As Stuart Hall has noted, under the 'chimera of compassionate conservatism' the coalition government has used the banking crisis as an alibi while they 'seized the opportunity to launch the most radical, far-reaching and irreversible social revolution since the war' (Hall 2011). Hall argues that the 'crazies are in charge of the asylum', motivated by an ideology that the conservatives have been designing since the 1970s. In his view, the members of the government who are driving the neoliberal agenda are ruthless and single minded in their attack, and are prepared to make an irreversible transformation of UK society, caring little about the fall out (Hall 2011). I suggest that a language of therapy, that focuses on self fulfillment has been appropriated into this ideological plan as servant to neoliberal values. It is to this that I now turn.

Wellbeing Measurement and the Therapy Culture Debate.

There has been an ongoing debate amongst cultural analysts about the absorption of the language of therapy into everyday life and the coterminous preoccupation with the self. Early work by Reiff (1966) stimulated a range of social scientists and academics to examine a therapeutic culture as a negative feature of late modernity. For some (Lasch 1991; Reiff 1966; Sennett 1986) this is an indication of cultural decline. For Reiff (1966) wellbeing has become an end in itself, rather than a byproduct of striving after some superior common end. Cloud (1998) identified therapeutic rhetoric as a hegemonic force in American political life. She argued that therapeutic discourse works within what she calls the hegemonic framework of liberal individualism; with a focus on privatization which has facilitated a channeling of social discontent into an individualistic private sphere which forces reform and adaption. Furedi (2004) argues that British culture since the Second World War has uncritically assimilated the therapeutic ethos, with therapeutic language permeating government domestic policy initiatives. There are others, who offer, if not a positive, then at least a more nuanced and ambivalent reading of the therapeutic turn (see Layton 2011; Richards and Brown 2011; Yates 2011; Illouz 2008; Wright 2008; Elliott and Lemert 2006). Richards (2007; Richards and Brown 2011) proposed that emotion has become a more visible part of everyday life, which he described as a process of emotionalisation. He noted that the

development of therapeutic culture is complex and multivariate with the enabling possibility of self-reflection as opposed to self-fulfillment as an ideal. In these more nuanced readings of therapy culture we find that a better understanding of the self enables us to be more attuned to others and their suffering. I suggest that it is possible to position the proposal to measure wellbeing within this debate around 'therapy culture'. I contend that the measurement of wellbeing, as proposed by David Cameron is emblematic of a version of self help therapy culture that comes to us in the bite sized chunks of daily affirmations, positive thinking manuals and CBT, which is more akin to the consumer culture of late capitalism with notions of self development and fulfillment. As Yates (2011) has pointed out, the goal of emotional wellbeing has become a consoling promise of a happy and unified self.

I would suggest that the rhetoric of wellbeing has been appropriated from the language of therapy to justify huge spending cuts and the dismantling of the welfare state. As a precursor to the cuts to the public sector imposed by the Coalition government, the then shadow chancellor, George Osborne wrote an article for *The Guardian Newspaper* (2010) in which he unveiled the Conservative Party's 'Manifesto for Public Sector Workers'. He insisted that despite 'decades of pay rises' 40% of public sector workers say that morale is low, compared to only 16% of workers in the private sector, his conclusion therefore, was that it is not the money that matters to public sector workers but their state of wellbeing, so it is wellbeing that the Conservative Party will seek to promote, he claimed; 'The Conservatives are on the side of Britain's public servants'. Once elected, the Coalition government committed to cutting public sector pay, slash spending and cap pensions. Cultural critic Žižek (2009) contends that we are in the midst of a new process of privatization of the social by the establishing of new enclosures, the market has now invaded spaces that used to be the domain of the state such as those of education and prisons. The proposal to measure the nation's wellbeing, in conjunction with the policy to calculate the value of non-market goods, is an example of the neoliberal desire to configure us as *homo economicus*. At the heart of neoliberal economics we find what Beck (2011, p.xxi) defines as the 'autarkic human self', the individual alone is the master of his or her life. The ethics of the market place have invaded economic and political thinking with the key maxims of public life being competition, cost effectiveness and the creation of wealth, the individual is isolated, yet supposedly self sufficient, there to serve the demands and purposes of western capitalism. According to Cooper, as the state retreats from direct service provision, it still retains an inclination to govern, but this takes the form of 'governance' or 'governing yet not governing' (Cooper 2008, p.33) as it establishes ways to audit, to measure and to define standards. Contemporary social policy, Cooper says; 'is distinctive for the manner in which it aims to penetrate to the heart of how individuals function in a search for reconstruction of our civic identities' (Cooper 2008, p.36).

The model of wellbeing promoted by David Cameron is intrinsically linked to a version of wellbeing as happiness propounded by neoliberal ideals predominant in the USA and UK. At stake here is that, if unchallenged, the prevailing view of wellbeing will be underpinned by a perception that it is up to the individual to choose and design his or her own wellbeing. That construction of wellbeing will only be acceptable if it is compatible with the systematic requirements of western capitalism (Hartmut 1998). Under such constraints there is a tendency for uncritical acceptance of certain 'givens' such as 'freedom of choice' forming a key constituent of wellbeing; the notion of 'choice' being concomitant with an economic account of wellbeing that is about maximizing one's utility (Carlisle and Hanlon 2007). The usefulness of exploring such concepts as wellbeing is that it captures and reproduces important social norms, notably in a consumer society, where wellbeing emerges as a normative obligation and wellbeing practices are frequently consumerist in character (Sointu 2005). The individual is able to 'consume' wellbeing from a range of options from self-help books to life coaches. In an individualized consumerist society, failures to achieve wellbeing are perceived as personal negligence. A question that arises,

is this, is a consumer based ideal of wellbeing characteristic of an individualistic psychology, a psychology which stands accused of creating the very ills that it sets out to heal (Illouz 2008). Indeed, materialism and individualism have been shown to be detrimental to health with increased levels of anxiety, anger, isolation and alienation (Eckersley 2006). Significantly, these ailments are 'contagious' and; 'few denizens of the liquid modern society of consumers are fully immune' (Bauman 2008, p.27).

I want to argue that the public and media responses to Cameron's wellbeing measurement proposals are indicative of manic defenses as described by the psychoanalyst and scholar Peltz (2006). It is her contention that the Anglo-American model of unfettered market economy comes into direct conflict with the goals of a democratic society, committed to providing social safety nets for all its members. As a result, there is a proliferation of manic defenses to protect against feelings of loss and abandonment. These manifest as; 'resignation, psychic deadness, cynicism or over reliance on hypomanic denial, flights to action, and omnipotence' (Peltz 2006, p.73). Evidenced here with the flight to action of the Action for Happiness movement, the cynicism of the print media, the resignation of the British people with their 'keep calm and carry on' approach and the omnipotence of the very project itself, to collect the wellbeing data of a nation. As the cultural studies scholar Gilbert suggests, to 'keep calm and carry on' is 'exactly how the coalition wants us to behave' (Gilbert 2010, p.4). The phrase is at once an expression of perceived English stoicism and also an emotional clarion call by the state. The underlying subtext, however is the message: when faced with a crisis, do not show your emotions, but instead exercise reticence, passivity and control, and act as though nothing has happened. Defense mechanisms can have their protective uses, they can be psychic retreats which the individual can use to contain strong feelings of anxiety, however, they become pathological when they are unyielding; 'the relief provided by the retreat is achieved at the cost of isolation, and withdrawal' (Steiner, 1993, p.2).

Calculating Wellbeing – An Indication of Distress?

In a letter to Marie Bonaparte, Freud noted: 'The moment a man questions the meaning and value of life, he is sick, since objectively neither has any existence' (Freud et al. 1978, p.272). Now it seems a whole strand of psychology is dedicated to doing just that, with wide-ranging influence from economics to government policy, exemplified by proposals to measure happiness and wellbeing in the UK. In the light of Freud's observation, one must wonder whether the emergence of positive psychology is, perhaps, an indication of distress from the society that is western late modern capitalism. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, Young (2007) describes the experience of late modernity forming around three axes; '... the disembeddedness of everyday life, the awareness of a pluralism of values, and an individualism which presents the achievement of self realization as an ideal' (2007, p.2). For Young, the presentation of self realization as an ideal contributes to the idea that there are great potentialities for human flexibility and reinvention but, he goes on to note, that the side effect of this are 'ontological insecurity' and a 'precariousness of being' (2007, p.3). According to Harvey, neoliberalism as an economic theory proposes that wellbeing is best achieved through the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms, individual liberty and freedom is seen as sacrosanct, the social good will be increased through the maximization of the reach and frequency of market transaction, as a consequence however, 'we are obliged to live as appendages of the market' (2005, p.185). Despite the recent crisis in the banking sector and the economic fall out that follows, neoliberal ideology has an amazing capacity to adapt and, far from heralding its end, we can expect to see a third wave of neoliberalism (Steger and Roy 2010). As Stuart Hall has noted:

‘the present situation is another unresolved rupture of that conjecture which we can define as ‘the long march of the neoliberal revolution’. Neoliberalism is a strategy for boosting profits, lowering costs and weakening trade unions’ (Hall, 2011).

Elliott and Lemert propose that we have witnessed a shift from a polarized culture to a privatized culture, with the penetration of market forces into every aspect of life: ‘People, increasingly, seek personal solutions to social problems in the hope of shutting out the risks, terrors, persecutions that dominate our lives in the global age’ (Elliott and Lemert 2006, p.9).

The projection of social problems back onto the individual, as seen in the current rhetoric of wellbeing measurement, is symptomatic I would suggest, of what the psychoanalyst Lynn Layton (2006) describes as the dominant norm of liberal individualist ideology. That norm, as defined by Layton is the unlinking of the individual from their social contexts. She argues that there has been a subordination of ‘sensuous human existence and morality’ to the ‘facts’ of the marketplace, this technical rationality severs the individual from their social and natural world and also from each other. The split between the public and the private realms, Layton suggested, produces hostile and submissive versions of dependency on one hand and hostile and omnipotent versions of agency in the other. As Richards contends, the acceptance of our dependence on others; ‘cannot be endured by the neoliberal mind’ or by the ‘psychologist connoisseurs of happiness’ (Richards 1989, p.26). The result of this denial of dependency is a need to expunge the world of reminders of the reality of dependency as exemplified by welfare recipients or the NHS. We find ourselves in a post-dependent society, argues Dartington (2009), in which individual self-interest has become a sufficient explanation of socio economic theory. Layton (2006) points out that, in order to sustain itself, capitalism needs to foster these dominant discourses that initiate a split between the private and the public; as it prevents us from knowing the real damage that capitalism can do to our psyches, to the social world and to nature.

Drawing on Peltz’s proposal that there has been a proliferation of manic defenses in western society I suggest that, so-called happiness measurement can be understood in terms of Klein’s (1935) concept of ‘splitting’ off of an affect or object. The consequence of splitting is that we become fragmented; we spilt off parts of ourselves as a psychic defense. In the measurement of happiness we see the splitting off of an emotional state in an attempt to categorise and control it. However, we need both happiness and sadness, As Music (2001) reminds us, we need to experience both pain and exuberance and all that comes in between. He goes on to suggest that the value of psychoanalysis is that it aims at enabling a capacity for self reflection better able to experience a genuine breadth and depth in our emotional lives. I will now explore the potential for a psychoanalytically informed view of wellbeing.

The Potential For A Psychosocial Counter Discourse.

I have argued so far that the current exposition of wellbeing measurement, as deployed by David Cameron, is underpinned by a culturally powerful therapeutic discourse, comprised of a version of self-help therapy culture that has an undercurrent of neoliberal pro-market values. This discourse has been strategically applied by the current government as a means of situating the locus of responsibility for personal wellbeing firmly on the individual. However, I contend that psychoanalytic ideas could enable the retrieval of an alternative narrative, another way of thinking about what wellbeing may mean.

One might expect in the first instance that psychoanalytic ideas would play no part in the debate around measuring the nation's wellbeing; the starting point for Freud’s psychoanalysis is how to live with normal unhappiness (1895). Freud’s venture, according to Reiff (1966), was to

enable us to strengthen our inner resources against obsolete cultural systems of inhibitions, our inherited moral systems were no longer fit for purpose in a culture where our expectations for happiness were forever rising. As Reiff noted; 'Freud embarked on a modest experiment: His doctrine promises not more happiness but less misery' (Reiff, 1987, p.38). However, the psychoanalytically informed psychosocial project is about learning to live with tensions and it is potentially in that psychosocial space that a counter discourse may be found (Richards et al 2009).

I would suggest that the intervention of a psychoanalytically inflected, psychosocial 'voice' into the debate may enable the de-privileging of measurable data so that the analysis can include experiential and qualitative data that may incorporate the wholeness of lived experience. Cooper argues that policy analysis tends to be technocratic, rationalist and instrumental, with policy discourse seeing the subjects of analysis as whole and unified (Cooper 2009). Psychoanalysis can offer a 'yardstick' for political development because, according to Frosh (1987), its subject matter is the clarification of the needs and desires that people have. More importantly, I would concur with Rustin when he noted that: 'On a more macro-social plane, the idea that mental pain and anxiety constitute valid claims on social attention has import for broader principles of social organization, qualifying and constraining the logic of markets or bureaucracies as arbiters of social life' (Rustin, 1995, p.241).

Whilst it is possible to view the absorption of the language of therapy into everyday life as being coterminous with the preoccupation with the self. It is also possible to view therapeutic culture as a valuable resource both in professional and cultural terms, which has enabled a language of the self, of emotion and of identity underpinned by an emotional style with a potential for empathy and recognition of the other (Illouz 2008). Richards (2007) noted that a therapeutic culture could allow for an expressiveness of different types. Whilst it can be commandeered for the expression of selfishness and contrivance, it can also allow for the opening up of an opportunity for reflexivity and a growth in compassion. At the heart of psychoanalysis there is a call for an increased insight into our own psychic lives. This increased self-observational capacity can enable a self-awareness, to know that whilst we are able to show love, and to feel happiness, we are also able to show jealousy, anger, lust and disappointment. A psychoanalytically informed therapeutic sensibility can instill a 'reparative generosity born from a knowledge of and remorse about the damage we are capable of inflicting' (Richards and Brown 2011, p.21). I have sought to consider the issue of wellbeing measurement in its wider social context and I conclude that ideas from psychoanalysis may permit us to think with greater depth about what it means for our being to be well.

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